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CAPITOL SPOTLIGHT
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"KEEP THE SPEED LIMIT AT 55 M.P.H."

As a member of the California Congressional Delegation I intend to do everything in my power to keep California's speed limit on all highways and freeways at the current maximum of 55 miles per hour. My reasons for supporting the current speed limit are extremely simple.

Above all else, I am thoroughly convinced the 55 m.p.h. limit saves lives. I do not mean it saves a few lives. The statistics I have studied indicate that traffic fatalities in California are approximately one thousand fewer each year than they would be under the old 65 mile per hour limit!

Second, reduced traffic fatalities are the most important but not the only part of the accident story. Accidents at reduced speeds result in less permanently disabling injuries, less pain and suffering, less drain on our badly limited hospital and medical resources and lower charges to insurance companies for auto and property damage. Obviously, the less insurance companies must pay in medical bills and property damage, the lower the premiums for all of us.

My first concern is preserving life and reducing suffering. However, I am also profoundly impressed by the impact the 55 mile per hour limit has made on gas consumption. Many people have forgotten that the limit was initially imposed in 1974 not as a safety measure but to save gas during the Arab oil embargo. The savings have been enormous. The Department of Energy estimates that the savings just during the first year of the 55 m.p.h. ceiling were nearly a quarter of a million barrels of oil per day.

The 55 m.p.h. limit has contributed to the current glut on the world oil market. It has, therefore, also contributed to the diminished dependence of all industrialized nations on Arab oil. Imagine what pressures Secretary of Defense Weinberger would be bringing on Israel now if the world oil situation were what it was nine years ago!

While it is true that each state sets its own speed limit, the federal government has played a very important role in establishing and maintaining the uniform 55 m.p.h. limit which now blankets the country. We in Congress have tied billions of dollars in federal highway funds directly to maintenance of the 55 m.p.h rule by each state.

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If California were foolish enough to lift this rule, we would lose approximately one billion dollars in federal aid for the construction and maintenance of our highways and freeways. I will do all I can to make sure that the federal government continues to wield this "big-stick" over states under pressure to raise the speed limit.

I have reviewed the arguments against the 55 m.p.h. rule. They simply don't stand up. The fact that many people ignore the rule is an argument for stricter enforcement and stiffer fines -- not for abolishing the rule. The fact that independent truckers, cab drivers and others suffer an economic loss is regrettable -- but not grounds for deliberately increasing traffic deaths. As for those drivers who are frustrated in not being able to use the public thoroughfares as a racetrack, they need to spend a night in an emergency room. Traffic safety experts estimate that perhaps as many as 50,000 lives have been saved across the nation since the 55 m.p.h. limit was adopted. Coincidentally, this is almost the same number of American lives that were lost in the war in Vietnam. Are we willing to deliberately bring upon ourselves 50,000 casualties over the next ten years to satisfy a few special interest groups or motorists who see driving as a source of excitement?